

## **Illinois High Schools: Then and Now**

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High schools in Illinois have changed a lot since the 1940s. Clothes, hair styling, school clubs and after school activities of the 1940 are all very different. The high schools of 2004 are all much larger with bigger classes and much higher graduation rates.

During the early 1940s the country was in the midst of World War II which also affected day-to-day high school life. Dim-outs and blackouts were common and each year a large number of senior students enlisted in the army as soon as their chance to serve their country came.

It was not always that way though. Before the war thirty-nine percent of high school seniors said they would never enlist in the army, and thirty-seven percent said they would only enlist if there was a war. Many people at the time wondered what would happen to this generation.

A typical high school student's day in the 1940s consisted of an early morning wake up to help out with the other children or if you lived on the average Illinois farm. School days were somewhat shorter than they are today but still included some of the same classes such as biology and algebra. After school most students participated in some club. After club meetings students went home, did homework and chores, and then went to bed early. This was a continuous cycle for the high school students. Today students in high school do not have to wake up as early because there is less to do. School days are a little longer and school clubs, except for sports, are no longer as common or popular, although some students do participate in them.

Since the 1940s overall graduation rates from Illinois high schools have jumped considerably. In the 1940s only 24.5 percent of 25-year-olds had a high school diploma; in 2000 83.4 percent of 25-year-olds had a high school diploma. In the 1940s work and money became more important to students than school because of low income and the war. About 13.7 percent of high-school-aged students had only five or less years of schooling compared to 1.6 percent today. Many students were driven to a life of stealing or quit school to start making money at a young age. By the end of the 1940s, graduation rates were slowly increasing. This could be because of the parents and the common slogan of that time, "School is the place to be. Without a high school education, the future will be dark".

If you walked into a typical Illinois high school about 1940 you would see girls wearing short skirts because of the shortage of cloth due to the war, bobby socks, saddle shoes and sometime blue jeans. They would wear anything plain and practical due to the rationing of cloth and anything elaborate was looked down upon. Girls' hair was normally dyed peroxide blonde and held up in a snood, which is a small netlike cap worn to keep the hair in place. By the end of the 1940s, the "in" style was the "New Look". The look came about at the end of the war when most of the rationing ended. Young men wore casual jackets and trousers, or sometimes leather pants if they could afford it. Their hair was worn slicked back or to one side. Today you still see short skirts on the girls, but not because of rationing. Bobby socks and saddle shoes are no longer worn, but blue jeans are very common. Hair is worn anywhere from the shoulders

to the waist. It is seen in a range of colors, but blonde hair is very popular. The young men wear casual clothes such as khakis and a tee-shirt. Hair is either long, to the neckline, or short and spiked.

After school, high school students went to drive-in theaters, such as the Skyview Theater in Belleville, or listened to radio shows about the war. They also listened to talk shows, soap operas or comedy shows. Televisions were not common in the 1940s. Today, after school, students go to the movies, a friend's house, or out driving.

In conclusion, the 1940s were a very interesting time. Many things changed due to the war such as clothing and after school activities. High school may not have been a popular place to be, but the education students received there was good and many students turned into productive citizens who influenced Illinois for the better. [From About, Inc. "Hairstyles in the 1940s" [www.beauty.about.com/cs/1940beautyhistory/qt/40hair.htm](http://www.beauty.about.com/cs/1940beautyhistory/qt/40hair.htm) (Oct. 5, 2004); The Costumers Namifesto and Tara Maginnis, "The History of Fashion and Dress", "<http://costumes.org/classes/fashiondress/WW1toWW2.htm>" (Oct. 5, 2004); Gina Giuliano; "Education, Reflecting Our Society", 2002 Edition Our Century 1930-1940; Skagit Valley Publishing Co., Our Century, Oct. 5, 2004; Tim Wood & R. J. Unstean, "The 1940s".]

From: About, Inc. "Hairstyles in the 1940s"  
<http://beauty.about.com/cs/1940beautyhistory/qt/40hair.htm> (October 5, 2004)

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